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The doing of thinking is not a hands free conversation.

Start reading on 10 seconds

AB

Thinking through doing is often a generative, speculative process, one that allows a fertile space for the minds to wander and be productive; to work things out. We see 'touch' activities that are innately process driven, such as cooking, knitting, gardening, or making pots as increasingly becoming essential counterpoints to the digital touch in everyday life. These are also all activities that are open to the mind focusing positively on wandering. This talk will reflect this nature in its structure and as such is not necessarily linear or obviously connected, we revel in losing the thread, so please bear with us! It is born from a conversation between us whilst doing an activity, this activity, this is something we believe is a way of discovering new thoughts, arguments, questions, ideas, answers, and so on.

AUDIO (end on YEAH)

EW

Doing is always active even when you are doing nothing, it is generative, it is usually useful; something productive comes out from doing. The hands are key to this, we learn through the hands, but do we acknowledge their importance in this regard as much as we should?

A child does not create structure, an adult sets it up and the child learns through curiosity, mimicry and play.

As an artist why is it that playing becomes something that has to be justified through a framework, playing for its own sake is not enough. But why not?

AB

Some artists might say that they do just go to the studio to play, but I cannot help but be sceptical of this, surely by being an artist one cannot return to the child's attitude to play. But play is a form of doing and surely doing is magnificently productive.

In Christopher Frayling's book *On Craftsmanship* he recounts a story of Ruskin taking his students away from the lecture theatres of Oxford to build a country road in order to "demonstrate his long held view that manual work could itself be educational." (83 Frayling)

The hands are an agent for doing, for being productive and useful, idle hands are the devil's playground, but hands can also be an agent for stopping, to disrupt and disobey the mind.

Darian Leader has pointed out in his recent book, *Hands*, the amount of instances in film culture “where it is the hand – either joined to the body or severed – that starts to function on its own, and nearly always murderously.”[1]

Last week I sat in front of Paul McCarthy’s ‘The Painter’ watching the artist playing a caricature of an abstract expressionist superstar, bludgeon and smash his character’s oversized hands with a chef’s knife for five minutes! Almost as if the madness was contained in the hands not the mind. There is a reason he did not do this to his nose, ears or eyes, the hands mean something and mean something profoundly. In several countries a form of punishment for crimes such as theft is to have the hands chopped off, perhaps a severe form of justice, but also indicative of the power and essentialness of the hands.

Perhaps this is why *Bake Off* is worth 75 million pounds, humans have a desire to see other people doing with spectacular success, but also to witness the times when the hands fail, the scones get swept from the worktop or the bread rolls fall from the oven to the floor? Later in Leader’s book he states, “To knit is to make, to create, to share, to participate, yes, but it is also to ward off, to block, to keep in check and fundamentally, to bind.” Here there is an implication of the power and autonomy of the hand from the mind. Philosopher Zdravko Radman has spoken of how the hands can become more inclined to operate independently from the conscious self, stating that the “hands are not faithful to the purposive mind, nor are they obedient servants to what objects afford us.” I propose (with no real basis other than observation) that, just as science has proved the existence of a gut brain that is dislocated and autonomous from the activity of the mind, so there might also be a hand brain, one that is free thinking in and of itself. If this is the case then the idea of the hand that disobeys and acts in conscious opposition to the mind’s intent is perhaps appealing; whilst also perhaps explaining why the human mind wants to keep the hands occupied with activity – typing, knitting, scrolling texting and so on – to ensure that the hands are occupied by the connection to the brain and not released to generate the hands own independence and thought.

If we allow that the hand brain does have an independent ability to act, to think and could lead the mind then perhaps the infant’s impulse to learn through touch, through doing, could be more urgently and effectively grasped and understood by adults. Simon Starling has talked[2] of the interweaving of ‘meaning and making’ and ‘making and meaning’. For Starling the interrelation of doing and thinking is key and not pre-ordained by a hierarchy of one over the other, each is vital, equal and integral; meaning creates making and doing thinking creates doing in a way that each distinction is collapsed into the practice or mindset of the creator.

EW

Ruskin’s Professor of digging, David Downs was engaging those humanities students in physical activity to create visceral learning, activating the hand brain, evidencing the gains made through doing, and doing as a way to accelerate to a broader comprehension of any subject (in that instance - digging a road), which would not occur through scholarly learning alone. Frayling’s understanding of Ruskin’s experiment pinpointed “the importance of the ‘tacit knowledge’ of the craftsman”

To quote Ruskin addressing his peers, " We live, we gentlemen, on delicate prey, after the manner of weasels; that is to say, we keep a certain number of clowns digging and ditching, generally stupefied, in order that we, being fed gratis, may have all the thinking and feeling to our selves.

Let a man once learn to take a straight shaving of a plank, or draw a fine curve without faltering, or lay a brick level in its mortar, and he has learned a multitude of other matters which no lips of man could teach him"

The experiential adds a layer of knowledge that reading, thinking, conversing cannot - the gain done by doing that first became academically acknowledged by Ruskin is perhaps now being re-energised in the digital age. The reward of experience is, as we know beneficial; the professor of digging is a professor of doing.

Touch is the first sense to develop in the womb and the most matured at birth continuing to be vital to our well being as an infant and often expressed by the carer through exaggerated repetitive and rhythmic actions as espoused by evolutionary psychologist Ellen Disseneyake in her Artification Hypothesis.

In order for our brains to function in a socially accepted healthy way or to understand emotional cues properly it is vital that we have experienced care viscerally in our upbringing - care cannot only be thought or spoken about in order for it to have an effect.

Aristotle noted that without touch one would die, without the other senses one could continue to live.

It is essential to feel things, to be able to gain, to learn, and it is not about feeling things in one way, but about exploring the complexity of what it means to feel in all the meanings of that word, the emotional, the physical, the experiential.

Learning through doing is not about what is produced by the doing, but about an exchange of touch, of visceral experience and physical investment and that the time spent in doing is being used for something useful, admirable and enriching. Doing is a catalyst for generative thought, day dreaming, mind wandering, losing ones thread – the value of this is incalculable as we can never withhold our multiple thoughts and commit to all the possible paths to follow, so part of the value of the activity is relinquishing time, and accepting you gain through these losses.

Since I was a child Doing for me is a way of working things out. I often spend months knitting complex aran jumpers for my godson. I post the jumper off to Devon and never see it again and over time I have come to understand the value here is the care shown through the time spent making the jumper and not in any reciprocity.

Made Things are ascribed value. Value is assigned to Making due to such variables as skill, time invested, and other less interesting factors like desirability of the made object.

but if I am making things of seemingly no value or use like my clay pots that get buried, what am I learning?

AB

And also what was the gain of it? How does one quantify the experiential; what do you gain other than a library of experiences to draw upon? Is there more or less value because you have more experiences to connect?

You can describe this accumulation of experiences as being akin to the billions of stars in the sky. Each star is a centre that is discreet and unique, akin to the nodes in our brains.

Over centuries man has looked to the sky in wonder and amazement, but also sought to place structure in order to make use of the sky.

Constellations could be seen as man's way of seeking sense, but also of connecting the discreet bodies. If one sees this view of the stars as being comparable to the mind, then the thoughts created in a free-flowing way can become connected and useful to us, when connected through the idea of constellations[3].

As a young man I used to make up constellations with my father, creating and allowing things to grow through a discussion, letting it happen and occur; creating what Jonathan Lasker has termed putting "things in non-normal relationships to each other" which I see as a brilliant definition for art; and of what occurs when you allow the mind to do its 'thing' when engaged in an activity, to try to make order from chaos, but also revelling in chaos.

put in audio of pirates and farmers (I can't quite see how)

We could not write this paper by the activity of doing creating thought and conversation alone, for it created space to get side tracked. We dug a road. We wrote the paper by listening back, by thinking, by writing, by talking – by doing in fact. Our hands disobeyed our minds, took us away from the thread, creating new values rather than concentrating on a value. But to make art or write a paper for a conference, you have to keep on the thread for it to become something that is useful for others, but the vital part when it becomes art is when a thread is found, pulled out, noticed and paid close attention to, without losing the others.

Ew

it is about spending time Doing, It's not about mastering something. I don't want to be a master potter I wanted to make a pot that's right for the reason I was doing it.

AB

Mastering something is about an end point and surely an artist always wants to be in the midpoint?

Why would you want to make something that is mastered, to be a master potter, a master knitter, a master painter?; If you try to master, you have to directly compare yourself with established masters and to do this is surely impossible, we only compare ourselves with the extraordinary parts of the master, not the whole picture of them as an artist or a person, I would love to paint like Caravaggio, but I would not like to be a murderer.

Ew To me it is about not investing any end result or outcome with **embodied** importance. A master potter would smash the first tea bowl, or throw a few pots and then return them to the wedge of clay with no emotional loss because it is all about the doing- that's where the learning resides, not in the pot.

AB Once you do master something then you have a choice, do you move on or do you keep creating perfection? To me they are both equally valid, but one could only be an option to my own mind, one is simply absurd!

EW

Surely allowing something to be for itself and not as supplementing some 'thing' you don't have is all you need.

I see my pots as being like the science experiment evidence of something having happened. To me it is data, or a map, perhaps a starting point, or a conclusion. I can definitely not become a master of doing and nor should I want to.

But would I want to be a professor of digging, of doing?

I would, so what is the difference between a master and a professor; and how does this relate to this innate power and potential of thinking through doing?

AUDIO 26 on 3 onwards Peter Dreher right when I began. bertswort 100 times 13:30

AB As the audience or receiver you need to acknowledge the repetitive, to create a sense of value. To have so many there, it must mean something, surely? If you do something for long enough, then it must mean something, surely? Coupled with the meaning within the repeated activity is the fear that what you do as a maker has no meaning, for you or for others.

To go to the studio as a prolonged activity, as a repetitive process that can become ritual or habit, can also become ordinary and normal, which in itself is privileged and allows access to extraordinary things. Do we realise what we are doing or its importance of doing things with your hands, because it is so normal? One definition of artistic research is about the act of looking hard, but
do we pay enough attention to this?

EW

Repetition is a form of paying attention.

Art does come from noticing; noticing something is significant;
the significance being held as vital; then doing something to reveal to oneself and others this vital thing,

I think we all find different things to pay attention to but I think as artists we might simply all be saying look- this is how I feel/ how I think...

But what to pay attention to if everything has the potential to be interesting?

If the least interesting thing can still be interesting, we need to sieve out the things that are vital

to us. And by accepting the fact that everything has the potential to be interesting, the artists' mind is freed to be productive precisely because the value of mindwandering is also vital, allowing the act of doing to find the next thread

AB

The first professor of visual design at MIT György Kepes said that "Each visual configuration contains a meaningful text, evokes associations of things, events; creates emotional and conscious responses." [4]

This is something I believe is true, But also the activity of doing can also contain the meaningful text that Kepes speaks of, but that 'text' is not always available or visible to those that do the doing.

The act of you, Elizabeth doing the activity of thinking by making pots creates the meaningful text. One that is unlikely to be created by others engaged in the same activity but one that could be read by those encountering your art. We sought to use the activity of digging the clay and making the pots to prompt thought and conversation; to confirm our belief that the doing of thinking is not a hands free conversation, thinking is done between the head, the gut and the hands as connected but also free thinking entities, something perhaps proved as we approach lunch on the last day of a conference.

EW

To be the artist engaging in this act of thinking through doing though is complex.

So many threads and so much potential to get lost in. Losing the thread, the point; sounds quite scary and I hope it is not what either of us do. Being an artist, perhaps, is just the way you see and respond to the world. You want to give things to others but also to get something back from what you give out, not that it has to be life changing, not original, not enlightening, but of gain, of value. Affirmation of this is of some use.

AB

Of course all of this is normal and simple, but also infinitely multifarious and nuanced. In the introduction to John Gribbin's book, Deep Simplicity, he asked the inventor of Gaia theory, James Lovelock if "all this business of chaos and complexity is based on two simple ideas - the sensitivity of a system to its starting conditions, and feedback? Yes he replied, that's all there is to it."

In some ways it is as simple as there being only two types of people, Dave Hickey's analogy of pirates and farmers, if you like, which when extrapolated out from reveals itself as being infinitely complex. The value of thinking through doing is something we believe is undervalued, perhaps not in this arena of artists, but by society. A point here is that it is not in each isolated instance where the importance lies but in the connections, doing is not separated from thinking, Darian Leader, again, "There is listening AND doodling, knitting AND talking, praying AND

manipulating beads. The real question here is the AND.” In our argument this is key, it is about recognising that it is the AND that is vital, thinking doing; IS doing AND thinking, thinking AND doing as completely integrated whole. Do we need then to return to the mind-set of how the foetus explores the womb to learn, with our adult library of experiences that makes the thinking through doing a philosophical position. The doing, the hands as agents for the mind to focus as well as disruptors that allow us to lose the thread can profoundly tell us about how we do and what we learn.

[1] Darian Leader, Hands, p4

[2] S. Starling. Simon Starling in conversation with Sam Thorne, Artist talk delivered at Nottingham Trent University, 12 May 2016

[3] Thanks to Steve Dutton for introducing us to this concept of thought.

[4] György Kepes, Artistic research book, p13